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# Revitalizing the Nation's Main Streets

**T**he historic commercial streets of our nation's cities and towns hold a special place in our collective psyche. This is the stage setting where much of the drama of the American experience was played out. At their origins in the early-19th century, commercial centers emerged from the natural removal of business functions from residential uses as early settlements coalesced into cities and towns. The emerging role of these centers was expressed in distinctively commercial architecture and reinforced by transportation routes and hubs. Their imagery became solidified by the mid-20th century, just as the forces of out-migration precipitated by the automobile, suburbanization, shopping malls, box stores, and sprawl weakened them and caused them to struggle to maintain their unity of purpose and appearance.

Preserving the Main Streets of America is one of the most successful activities of the historic preservation movement in recent decades. In 1977, the National Trust for Historic Preservation launched its demonstration Main Street Project. Today, 20 years later, the National Trust's National Main Street Center provides services to over 1,100 towns and cities in 40 states and Puerto Rico. Similar programs have taken root abroad. The Main Street lessons have spun off into many other communities as well, whether or not they are part of a formal Main Street program.

The National Park Service historic preservation programs carried out in partnership with

states, federal agencies, American Indian tribes, and local governments—including the National Register of Historic Places and the historic Preservation Tax Incentives program—are key tools that support Main Street efforts. These tools are part of the larger toolbox of financial incentives, formal recognition and designation programs, and technical assistance that serve thousands of communities nationwide.

Since their establishment in 1976, the preservation tax incentives have spurred the rehabilitation of thousands of commercial buildings along the nation's main streets. Often, commercial uses are retained in shops and restaurants that serve a specific consumer niche. In other instances, the buildings are converted into new uses, such as offices, residential use, and civic purposes. Despite the changed function of main streets, their essential coherence can be preserved and they can continue to serve as common ground in communities.

The National Main Street Center's success is based on a "common sense approach to downtown revitalization" in small towns and large cities. The four point approach includes organization, design, promotion, and economic restructuring. The NPS Preservation Tax Incentives program contributes to all four approaches because it offers economic incentives; provides for the property to meet continuing or changed uses; and ensures the protection of a building's historical, cultural, and architectural values. The preservation of main street is dependent on the rehabilitation and re-use of key community landmarks, such as schools, hotels, corner banks, and courthouses. It also relies on the preservation and sensitive infill of whole streets of buildings and structures that define the central business district.

The former First National Bank in Horseheads, New York, is an example of the re-use of a key community landmark. Constructed in 1927, the bank building was designed in the Colonial Revival style and constructed of brick and stucco. It was included as a contributing resource to the Hanover Square Historic District in Horseheads, a village that typifies the many small canal towns settled in the Southern Tier of New York State during the late-18th and early-19th centuries. The Hanover Square Historic District is the commercial center of Horseheads. The bank building is situated on Hanover Square, a downtown crossroads that affords it a prominent location.

In the bank's interior, mezzanine areas flank the double-height banking room. The original vault was in place, as were the teller's counter and windows and historic office space. The Groff Partnership converted the building into law offices and rental commercial space. The project architect, John Lusk, transformed the building and retained

*The former First National Bank in Horseheads, New York, was converted into law offices and commercial spaces using the historic preservation tax incentives. The re-use of the building returned a prominent downtown building to active use. Photo courtesy John Lusk.*





*In the conversion of the First National Bank in Horseheads, New York, to law offices, the original tellers' counters were retained and new offices created behind them. Photo courtesy John Lusk.*

the major interior spaces by inserting partners' offices in the banking room and support spaces in other areas. The original tellers' counters were largely retained and new offices created behind them. The historic vault grilles were retained in place, and a new wall created behind them to establish secondary, smaller commercial spaces. The re-use of the building through the Rehabilitation Tax Credits returned a prominent downtown building to active use, helping to stabilize and reverse the appearance of a vacant downtown.

Retaining residential functions in commercial centers is a major objective of main street revitalization. Often, these functions are placed in former hotels or large department stores, which lend themselves to multi-family dwellings. In Hibbing, Minnesota, the Renaissance Revival style Androy Hotel is one such structure. Constructed in 1921, the hotel is the premier building in the community and serves as the architectural anchor of Hibbing's

*The 1921 Androy Hotel, Hibbing, Minnesota, was converted into senior citizen housing and commercial space using the historic preservation tax incentives. Photo courtesy PM + A Ltd.*



central business district. It was designed to serve the social and hostelry needs of a growing mining community. The hotel closed in 1977, was nominated individually to the National Register in 1986, and was slated for demolition.

Starting in 1993, the Androy Limited Partnership undertook the conversion of the hotel building into a residential apartment house for senior citizens and commercial space and used the Rehabilitation Tax Credits to make the project feasible. The firm of Paul Madsen, PM+A Ltd. of Minneapolis, Minnesota guided the conversion. The rehabilitation involved redesign of the interior floor plans on the second through fourth floors to accommodate apartments, restoration of the lobby and formal dining room, and provision of a new physical plant and systems. Today, the building again serves as a living community landmark. It has served as a catalyst in the rehabilitation of adjacent and nearby buildings in the Howard Street Historic District, the community's main street.

Located 30 miles northeast of Seattle, Washington, the town of Snohomish nominated its original community core to the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. Snohomish is significant for its role as opening the interior of the Pacific Northwest territory for settlement and commerce. Located within this older town center are several dozen buildings dating from 1890 to 1910. They are constructed of brick and wood and recall the timber mills that provided the major economic force to the town.

Within the registered district, several key commercial structures have been rehabilitated using the Rehabilitation Tax Credits starting in 1978 and continuing to today. These include the Northern Hotel Building, Nelson's Furniture Store, and the Pioneer Market building. Because of these projects and other community initiatives, Snohomish has remained virtually unchanged since the turn of the century, even as it has adapted to its role as a suburb of Seattle.

Beyond the simple figures of 25,000 projects nationwide since the late 1970s are the thousands of modest-sized commercial structures in communities nationwide. Many of these were vacant and situated in commercial areas that were bypassed by the interstate and strip malls. The Preservation Tax Incentives program offers the best hope for re-using these buildings and bringing economic activity back to traditional main streets. The revitalized main streets of America can again serve as cohesive forces in binding individuals and families into communities.

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